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ABSTRACT

A teacher survey was conducted in order to collect information on the cultural background of French-speaking Acadian ("Cajun") students in Louisiana and its possible effects on their school achievement. Teachers in selected predominantly Cajun communities were asked to respond to questions which covered: learning style, language, and experiential background, achievement in reading and language arts, parental attitude and school support, and any unique interests and beliefs of the children of which teachers should be aware. Over 200 teachers responded to the questionnaire. Among the more significant responses was the frequency with which teachers noted language and vocabulary deficits. Although the Cajun dialect was cited by many as a factor in poor performance on traditional grammar drills, of much greater concern was the deficiency of language development as it related to general vocabulary knowledge, and the ability of the students to express ideas orally and in written form. Because of the large numbers of low socioeconomic families in Cajun communities, language deficits were often blamed on lack of travel, few books in the home, and parents' speech patterns. Cajun children were described as cooperative, creative, and sensitive. Their "unique interests" are love of animals and nature. (KH)

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THE CAJUN CHILD IN THE EDUCATIVE PROCESS

BY

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The Cajun Child in the Educative Process

The Louisiana Acadians, better known as "Cajuns", make up the largest French-speaking minority in the United States. Generating much curiosity nationally, a great deal has been written about this group's history and ethnic identity, its food, music, festivals, language, folklore, and politics. But what about the Cajun child in the educative process? Little has been publicized besides the high rate of illiteracy in the French speaking communities. Outsiders may comment on the distinctive dialect which sets this group apart, but additional information concerning their unique cultural background and its possible effects on their school achievement has been difficult to acquire.

In an attempt to begin to look at data which would be of value to educators in schools with children of Acadian descent, teachers in selected predominantly Cajun communities were asked to respond to questions which covered learning style, language and experiential background, achievement in reading and language arts, parental attitude and school support, and any unique interests and beliefs of the children of which teachers should be aware. Over 200 teachers responded to the questionnaire. The survey included schools from

four parishes in Southwest Louisiana with grades K-12 being represented. The teachers reported that they had lived in this area on the average of thirty years, giving them a thorough knowledge of the Acadian culture, and the average number of years of teaching was ten.

Among the more significant responses from the teachers who were surveyed, were the frequency of language and vocabulary deficits which were noted. Although the Cajun dialect was cited by many as being a factor in poor performance on traditional grammar activities, it was only felt to occasionally interfere with achievement by approximately half of the teachers. Of much greater concern seemed to be the deficiency of language development as it related to general vocabulary knowledge, and the ability of the students to express ideas orally as well as in written form. Because of the large number of low socioeconomic families in these communities, teachers often blamed the language deficits on lack of travel, few books in the home, and the speech patterns of the parents.

The self concept of the Cajun child appeared to be about like other children the teachers had observed. Although they reported the children to be "sensitive to criticism of their dialect", they appeared as confident in the learning process as most. They were said to be motivated to work equally hard for tangible rewards and teacher praise. High grades as well as parent approval received low priority as motivating factors. There was no opinion given on whether learning was best done in groups or individually. Discipline

was not generally considered to be a problem, and parental attitude and support of education appeared to vary, with some teachers considering it excellent, and others poor.

Cajun children were described in the social setting of the classroom as cooperative and willing to share. Competition was also said to be keen. They were cited as frequently having a good sense of humor, taking special delight in sharing jokes and humorous incidents. In addition, they were said to be creative and sensitive, and very much oriented to family and tradition.

Perhaps the most interesting as well as enthusiastic responses from the teachers came from the question "What do you think are some unique interests and cultural traditions of which educators of Cajun children should be aware?"

Unique Interests

By far the most frequent response was the children's love of animals and nature, and enjoyment of the water - swimming, boating, crawfishing, crabbing, shrimping and fishing. Trapping and hunting were next, with dancing, French music, sports, and the celebration of holidays and festivals also being cited frequently. Other enjoyable activities in which the children were said to participate were: woodcarving, quilting, sewing, doll making, and art (painting, photography, leaded glass, ink sketches).

Cultural Traditions

Family get-to-gethers for barbeques, gumbos, crawfish boils, and a general "good time" was mentioned as one of the strongest traditions. The children learn superstitions from their parents, and many believe in traiteurs (a medicine doctor). One teacher wrote, "This doctor rubs something on an ailment and says a secret prayer. Sometimes the person has to wear an object to continue the healing process. A child in my class wore a coin around the neck to stop her nosebleeds." The celebration of holidays is another popular and joyful occasion for Cajun children where they participate in parades, fairs, and family gatherings. Several teachers mentioned the tradition of "paqué" - to break Easter eggs. The eggs are hit together and the one whose egg breaks first is the loser!

A strong tradition of Catholicism is also cited, with communion, confirmation, weddings and christenings being important events for the families. Several generations of families often live together, and grandparents, many of whom still speak French, are said to have a great influence on the children.

Food is mentioned often as something they love to talk about. Of the more unique dishes they enjoy are "boudin, cracklins, and cush-cush". Children are said to be little involved in family decisions, and the father was most frequently cited as head of the household.

Although there was not agreement on whether the parents of Cajun children want them to maintain their cultural identity, many of the

teachers did feel that educators should be aware of the historical background of French Acadiana. The fear was expressed also that the dialect of Cajun children is not a real handicap while they remain close to home, but on moving out of the area there is a possibility of being misunderstood, suffering ridicule, and being considered slow or remedial learners.

In conclusion, Cajun children were seen by their teachers as being as variable as most learners in achievement except in the area of vocabulary and language development. They were said to be fun-loving, cooperative, "like other children" in their need for discipline, oriented to the present, and creative learners with occasional interference of dialect and French intrusions. Their interests and cultural traditions are readily observable, and are vital aspects of their immediate environment. There are a wealth of talents teachers can tap in this unique cultural group, and knowledge of their festivals, Acadian heritage, and family traditions should provide the vehicle for effective teacher-pupil interaction as well as pupil growth in academics and self concept.

Suggested readings:

Conrad, G. (Ed.). (1983). The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture. Lafayette, La.: Center for Louisiana Studies.

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